

Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) Final Performance Report

The final performance report summarizes the outcome of your LFPP award objectives. As stated in the LFPP Terms and Conditions, you will not be eligible for future LFPP or Farmers Market Promotion Program grant funding unless all close-out procedures are completed, including satisfactory submission of this final performance report.

This final report will be made available to the public once it is approved by LFPP staff. Write the report in a way that promotes your project's accomplishments, as this document will serve as not only a learning tool, but a promotional tool to support local and regional food programs. Particularly, recipients are expected to provide both qualitative and quantitative results to convey the activities and accomplishments of the work.

The report is limited to 10 pages and is due **within 90 days** of the project's performance period end date, or sooner if the project is complete. Provide answers to each question, or answer "not applicable" where necessary. It is recommended that you email or fax your completed performance report to LFPP staff to avoid delays:

LFPP Phone: 202-720-2731; Email: USDALFPPQuestions@ams.usda.gov; Fax: 202-720-0300

Should you need to mail your documents via hard copy, contact LFPP staff to obtain mailing instructions.

Report Date Range: (e.g. September 30, 20XX-September 29, 20XX)	September 30 th , 2014 – September 29 th 2015
Authorized Representative Name:	Steve Muntz
Authorized Representative Phone:	479-251-8310
Authorized Representative Email:	info@ssawg.org
Recipient Organization Name:	Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, Inc. (SSAWG)
Project Title as Stated on Grant Agreement:	Growing Together: The Planning of a North Central Florida Farm Cooperative
Grant Agreement Number: (e.g. 14-LFPPX-XX-XXXX)	14-LFPPX-FL-0040

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Year Grant was Awarded:	2014
Project City/State:	Florida
Total Awarded Budget:	\$20,000

LFPP staff may contact you to follow up for long-term success stories. Who may we contact?

☐ Same Authorized Representative listed above (check if applicable).

☒ Different individual: Name: Marty Mesh; Email: Marty@Foginfo.org; Phone:(352) 377-6345

1. State the goals/objectives of your project as outlined in the grant narrative and/or approved by LFPP staff. If the goals/objectives from the narrative have changed from the grant narrative, please highlight those changes (e.g. “new objective”, “new contact”, “new consultant”, etc.). You may add additional goals/objectives if necessary. For each item below, qualitatively discuss the progress made and indicate the impact on the community, if any.
 - i. Goal/Objective 1: An assessment of the viability of a North Central Florida Farm Cooperative for marketing, and distribution.
 - a. Progress Made: Assessments have been made based on farmer participation, ability to collaborate, and cooperation goals created for two distinct North Central Florida Regions (North Central and Northeast, respectively). While three regions were originally gathered, two areas decided to merge their efforts into one. The goals created by each group represent the unique needs and desires of participating farmers.
 - b. Impact on Community: 3 groups of farmers were able to better understand area resources currently available, understand each other’s challenges, identify common hurdles, make connections with farmers within their regions, and create realistic short and long term goals for future collaborative marketing and distribution. The assessments were utilized to identify the collective strengths of each group and to serve as a platform for future development and capacity.
 - ii. Goal/Objective 2: An action plan for a North Central Florida Farm Cooperative reflecting the priority or priorities of North Central Florida farmers established by the assessment.
 - a. Progress Made: An action plan was created for one distinct region of North Central Florida (Northeast Florida). Each group was able to communicate and collaborate on first steps toward shared goals. These immediate action items include: research and decision making on legal organization, creating logo and shared branding effort with local artists and design groups, formulating a shared listserv and social media outlet to share ideas and collaborate on purchasing.
 - b. Impact on Community: Engagement with other community resources for creating a cooperative organization between area growers. First steps were made that build confidence and greater capacity among area farmers. There is potential for increased access to local food due to greater organization and collaboration between area farmers.
 - iii. Goal/Objective 3: Identify 25 purchasers who would purchase from a North Central Florida Farm Cooperative who are either not yet purchasing local or would significantly increase their local purchases.
 - a. Progress Made: 28 potential purchasers were contacted who would increase or begin purchasing from North Central Florida growers if there were increased cooperation and organization. These potential purchasers include: regional grocery chains, local health food stores, restaurants, institutions (schools, hospitals), national distributors, and regional distributors. Feedback from these

buyers was distributed and discussed at farmer meetings, with an emphasis on how to better include buyer needs in cooperative activities.

b. Impact on Community: There is potential for a greater amount of local foods in regional and local retail locations and restaurants. There is potential for increased income for area farmers who choose to work in cooperation.

2. Quantify the overall impact of the project on the intended beneficiaries, if applicable, from the baseline date. Include further explanation if necessary.
 - i. Number of direct jobs created: not applicable - planning grant only
 - ii. Number of jobs retained: not applicable
 - iii. Number of indirect jobs created: not applicable
 - iv. Number of markets expanded: not applicable
 - v. Number of new markets established: not applicable
 - vi. Market sales increased by \$insert dollars and increased by insert percentage%. Not applicable
 - vii. Number of farmers/producers that have benefited from the project:
 - a. Percent Increase: not applicable
3. Did you expand your customer base by reaching new populations such as new ethnic groups, additional low income/low access populations, new businesses, etc.? If so, how?

New businesses and different populations of consumers were contacted for the survey of potential buyers for the North Central Florida potential cooperative. In total 32 businesses were contacted and gave feedback on their interest and ability to engage with a farmer cooperative.

4. Discuss your community partnerships.
 - i. Who are your community partners? Florida local partners include: Duval County Health Department, Small Business Development Association, Red Hills Small Farm Alliance and Local Roots. Larger regional partners include: RAFI, Appalachian Harvest (Appalachian Sustainable Development), Winston County Self Help Cooperative, and Matson Consulting. Overall coordination of all these partnerships was primarily facilitated by Florida Organic Growers (FOG).
 - ii. How have they contributed to the overall results of the LFPP project? With assistance from the Duval County Health Department and the Small Business Development Center we were able to reach out to a larger audience of potential participants, and set accessible and free locations for public meetings. Red Hills Small Farm Alliance provided insights and best practices for an operating farmer alliance in Florida. They were able to present their process and share the path that they followed toward successful collaboration.
Regional partners assisted with larger picture planning, best practices advice, technical support, resource development, and consulting.
 - iii. How will they continue to contribute to your project's future activities, beyond the performance period of this LFPP grant?
The organizations mentioned have intentions to continue to support any momentum for a farmer cooperative organization within the North Central Florida region. This may include: meeting space, small business startup advice and consulting, as well as

technical support for an online marketplace, and logistics planning.

5. Are you using contractors to conduct the work? If so, how did their work contribute to the results of the LFPP project?

We utilized Local Roots Distribution owner, Emily Rankin, to assist with project feasibility, distribution logistics, as well as current and local information on:

- Varietal demand
- Location logistics and customer demographics
- Transportation costs
- Operational start-up
- Packaging and labeling

Her insights contributed to a deeper understanding, and more directed research into group capacity and target goals.

6. Have you publicized any results yet? *Yes

- i. If yes, how did you publicize the results? Newsletters have been sent out to each of the participating groups of farmers and interested community members. While most of these newsletters were aimed at encouraging participation in the project, one was linked to the Florida Organic Growers Blog site which provided a good summary of the work and results of the project up until that point.
- ii. To whom did you publicize the results? Any person that attended a farmer cooperative meeting, sent a letter of interest, or was identified as an operating farmer within the target area was emailed a newsletter. Additionally, a newsletter update was added to FOG's monthly email: The Organic Beet. Finally, an email news update was also distributed through SSAWG's newsletter.
- iii. How many stakeholders (i.e. people, entities) did you reach? The email news updates were sent to over 11,000 subscribed readers. Direct communication with participant stakeholders reached more than 80 potential participants.

*Send any publicity information (brochures, announcements, newsletters, etc.) electronically along with this report. Non-electronic promotional items should be digitally photographed and emailed with this report (do not send the actual item).

7. Have you collected any feedback from your community and additional stakeholders about your work? No
- i. If so, how did you collect the information?
 - ii. What feedback was relayed (specific comments)?

8. Budget Summary:

- i. As part of the LFPP closeout procedures, you are required to submit the SF-425 (Final Federal Financial Report). Check here if you have completed the SF-425 and are submitting it with this report: ☐
- ii. Did the project generate any income? No
 - a. If yes, how much was generated and how was it used to further the objectives of the award?

9. Lessons Learned:

- i. Summarize any lessons learned. They should draw on positive experiences (e.g. good ideas that improved project efficiency or saved money) and negative experiences (e.g. what did not go well and what needs to be changed).

ii.

Positive outcomes and lessons learned include:

- We learned to create more inviting meeting spaces that produce engaged participants for action outcomes. By the third series of meetings we began hosting the meetings at participating farms. This way, the farmers themselves felt in control of the events, interested, by being able to meet at their neighbor farmer's location, and ready to see that they are "all in this together" with shared frustrations and limitations that could be better tackled collectively.
- We learned to invite the largest number of possible stakeholders by phone! Using emails and bulletins did not always get the message across. By creating a phone tree, where farmers that knew each other were responsible for letting others know about the meeting, we were much more time efficient and effective in getting people who wanted to participate to the meetings.
- It is imperative to give everyone time to briefly share what their priorities are for the cooperative. This was hard to manage time-wise in a meeting, but it did help to engage participants quickly and open up the room for communication and more targeted discussion.
- It is important to end each meeting by going over what action steps needed to be handled before the next meeting, paired with making sure the date, if not the location, were already solidified for the next round or meetings.
- Having both regional and local partnerships increased the amount of shared learning. Different perspectives and capacity levels greatly enhanced the resources available to farmer participants and administrators of this grant.

Outcomes that could be improved upon:

- When an organization that is very involved with farmers works on the cooperative issue, it is very important to make sure that ownership does not lie within the organization, but within the participants. One of the factors we tried to convey repeatedly was that we were facilitators of the process, not the creators/owners. This was a difficult point to overcome, as the participants consistently looked to FOG to accomplish action items, plan meetings, invite stakeholders and reach out to producers. To overcome this obstacle, we made sure that at the end of the meetings, farmers were responsible for action items, not FOG staff. Additionally, in moving forward, those that wish to participate will be asked to contribute a monetary amount toward the cooperative as a token of dedication and commitment to the group process.
- Farmers are spread throughout a wide geographic area, and though we created a Facebook page to share ideas and progress, a better system than only having monthly face to face meetings needs to be created. This could be as simple as call-in meeting options. The short-fall of participation may also be due to the fact that at the beginning there are a lot of issues to talk through, rather than concrete action steps that many perceive as the only indicators of "progress". To rectify this, make sure that the process of building a cooperative is shared

openly, including the lengthy planning process so that folks are briefly aware of the path they are about to tread.

- Creating a mutually agreed upon beginning piece of work can take time. However, by focusing on the easier baby steps, this can build confidence in the group. Allowing people to spend too much time on huge goals at first can make the group feel overwhelmed. This wasted a lot of good momentum. Once the group realized the small things they could achieve, and began rolling with them first, it created a good amount of cohesion and built group confidence and competence. For instance, one group decided that working toward collective purchasing of products initially (frost cloth, seeds, fertilizer, etc.) would be an easy first group “win”.

iii. If goals or outcome measures were not achieved, identify and share the lessons learned to help others expedite problem-solving:

- Farmers that were interested in participating in the Farmer Cooperative were generally mixed vegetable, small scale producers. Initially, this project wanted to identify the key items that could be marketed collectively; however, with further investigation into interests and needs of the farmers, this was not a main goal. Farmers wanted to continue growing diversely, and not narrow down their scope, while still increasing their capacity to reach larger markets. What became more helpful was to investigate what manners of collaboration could assist them in selling their diversity, while maintaining the standards and identity that each farmer had worked hard to create.

iv. Describe any lessons learned in the administration of the project that might be helpful for others who would want to implement a similar project:

- Create a continuous process that keeps people engaged. It is easy to get discouraged by small turnouts at meetings, or the fact that each meeting has new faces, without dedicated participants. However, the cooperative will only work with dedicated members. Even if the group is 3 steady participants strong, this will be enough to start the momentum. Let these three dedicated farmers take the lead and set agenda items. Make sure the process is in the hands of the producers. As the process began, we set agenda items we thought were relevant, but we wanted to make sure that this process quickly was placed in the hands of potential cooperative leaders.
- Hold people accountable for their action items. If someone stated that they were going to complete an action for the group, the next meeting we made sure to bring that topic up and ask for updates.
- After each meeting we sent a newsletter update for those who attended and those who could not attend. We asked in the letter to add any other details or items they found important. Additionally, we posted any new information on the group Facebook pages to keep people engaged even when not planning or attending meetings.

- While staff turnover is not uncommon, there were two large transitions that occurred during this grant period with FOG. This slowed the immediate progress of planning and understanding the current situation. It also changed the dynamic of trust and built relationships among seasoned staff that left and new staff that were quickly trying to build rapport with area farmers. Additionally, the staff change affected the budget in travel due to changed base locations. Moving forward, it is difficult to predict when staff changes will occur, but it is prudent to be ready for the impact that such changes may have on grant implementation.

10. Future Work:

- i. How will you continue the work of this project beyond the performance period? In other words, how will you parlay the results of your project's work to benefit future community goals and initiatives? Include information about community impact and outreach, anticipated increases in markets and/or sales, estimated number of jobs retained/created, and any other information you'd like to share about the future of your project.

As the respective North Central Florida Farmer Cooperative groups continue to work together, FOG will continue to provide informational resources and connections to relevant data and organizations. As part of the project, two group Facebook pages were created to help facilitate conversation and collaboration. This page will continue to be administered by FOG staff, who will comment and add desired information as applicable. With FOG's extensive list of Farmer contacts, we will make sure that the Facebook page and other resources are accessible to all that are interested within the target region. Recently, the work that FOG has completed with North Central Florida Farmers has helped develop curriculum for the Jacksonville Region Small Farms Conference and focus groups that will be forthcoming for North and Central Florida Farmers. Additionally, FOG partners with other community businesses and organizations will host the Florida Local Food Summit. At this event, FOG will continue to present a Farmer Cooperative workshop that will help grow the understanding of, and connections within collaborative farmer efforts. Additionally, FOG will be willing to continue working towards greater cooperation between farmers whenever approached to do so.

As the groups progress FOG and Southern SAWG will share with each other and be eager to help others interested, not only in Florida but across the other 12 southern states where Southern SAWG operates, to share the process and resources that have been gathered thus far. In addition, Southern SAWG will stay alert for other farmer cooperative efforts across the region and feed potential leads and ideas back to FOG and the North Central Florida Cooperative groups. As these groups progress and become more successful, we anticipate asking their leadership to share their stories with others at the annual Southern SAWG conference.

- ii. Do you have any recommendations for future activities and, if applicable, an outline of next steps or additional research that might advance the project goals?

Moving forward, farmers in the North East Farmer Cooperative group are working on creating a logo and a cooperative structure that is best suited for Florida's legal environment. Farmer meetings will be planned by participating members who would like to meet on a rotating basis at farm locations. The end

goal for this group is to have a greater capacity to feed Duval County, including institutional buyers and retail locations.

In North Central Florida, farmers have focused on building capacity starting with collective purchasing. This activity will be executed by 5 participating farmers, with the hopes of eventually adding member services, such as: tool/implement sharing, labor sharing, and eventually health insurance options. FOG will continue to correspond with each group and ensure sustained resources and support is given when needed.